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ABSTRACT

Social studies classroom teachers can enliven high school history courses and motivate students to learn about history by using dramatic or heroic biographies in teaching history. The biographical approach centers on study of the lives, beliefs, and surroundings of historical actors. This approach differs from the "great man" theory of history in that ordinary as well as extraordinary people are studied. Specific advantages of the biographical approach include that students will learn to view history as currently significant and important to their personal concerns, identify with historical figures being studied, and become increasingly able to relate world developments to their own lives. Examples of philosopher-historians who wrote extensively about the nature of history and who can help teachers gain insights into the role of individuals include Karl Marx, Hippolyte Taine, Arnold Toynbee, Jose Ortega y Gasset, Max Weber, and Wilhelm Dilthey. Claims and beliefs of these philosopher-historians are discussed with particular regard to their beliefs about the number of persons and other factors which influence historical events and the extent to which these persons and factors can explain and predict such events. Commentary by the author and other scholars on the philosophers is combined with excerpts from the philosophers' works. (Author/DB)

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HISTORY THROUGH BIOGRAPHY?

A CONCEPTUAL RESEARCH STUDY

by

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies, College and University Faculty Assembly, Portland, Oregon

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HISTORY THROUGH BIOGRAPHY?

No doubt many social studies teachers have experienced the dilemma of wanting to use dramatic or heroic biographies in teaching history, while wondering if this would be a legitimate approach to studying history. One prominent supporter of teachers' use of biographies in teaching history was John Dewey. In Democracy and Education (1916, 214) he wrote that "the biographical method" is the "natural mode of approach to historical study." Unfortunately, he did not explain what he meant by "the biographical method", other than to say that it is not individuals studied in isolation. The purpose of this research study is to give an answer to the question of what the biographical method in historical study is.

THE PROBLEM

Today, some six decades after Dewey's statements, a framework for using biographies in the study of history still has not been developed. The statements of writers and researchers in social studies education have not progressed substantially beyond Dewey's 1916 statement (Schwarz, 1935, 93-105; Johnson, 1940, 130-144; Banks, 1951; Lodge, 1956; Brown, 1962, 243-255; Brufke, 1967; Lee, et al, 1973, 152-171). Like Dewey, they have claimed that history is brought back to life by the "biographical method", and, like Dewey, they have not indicated what, if any, principles and methods they have had in mind. The research task is to answer the "whether" and "what" questions, namely, (1) Is "biographical history" legitimate?, i.e., can one center the study of history in individual lives and still have it be history?, and, if so

(2) What is its warrantable content?, i.e., What principles should be followed and what methods should be used? This report presents the procedures used in the study, its findings, and some of the implications of these findings for social studies education.

PROCEDURES

The question used to generate data from which to infer the legitimacy and content of biographical history is: "What is the role of individuals in history?" To answer this question, an investigation has been made into a selection of the writings of six influential philosopher-historians: Karl Marx, Hippolyte Taine, Arnold Toynbee, Jose Ortega y Gasset, Max Weber, and Wilhelm Dilthey. Their claims and beliefs about the nature of history represent a monistic-pluralistic spectrum of historical theories. Such theories range from the monistic extreme (the single factor interpretations of history), to the pluralistic extreme (the virtually unlimited, multiple factor interpretations of history).

Representatives of

The Spectrum of Historical Theories

MONISTIC					PLURALISTIC
Marx	Taine	Toynbee	Ortega	Weber	Dilthey

The theories of Marx and Dilthey represent the spectrum's monistic and pluralistic extremes, respectively, while the theories of Taine, Toynbee, Ortega, and Weber represent those having elements of both monism and pluralism. The brief discussion below of the monism and pluralism of the six theories is intended to justify their classification and placement on the spectrum. This classi-

fication and placement of the theories is based upon what each of the six philosophers believed to be (a) the number of persons and other factors which influence historical events, and (b) the extent to which these persons and factors can explain and predict such events.

Marx held an economic interpretation of history. He contended that a single factor, the struggle betweer the exploiting and the exploited (class struggle), explains history and predicts the main lines of its future development. He argued that class struggle is also the struggle of individuals to establish or re-establish unalienated connections with the products of their labor and, therefore, with themselves (Schacht, 1970; Gurley, 1975; Tucker, 1965). By contrast, Dilthey believed that history displays no dominant or predictable pattern, but only the contingent and almost chaotic interplay of multiple institutions, groups, and individuals (Dilthey, 1962, 79, 161). For Dilthey, the course of historical events is affected by all factors which afford individuals or groups the means to achieve any degree of meaning, i.e., any sense of connectedness between themselves and their culture (Dilthey, 1962, 116-132).

Taine, Toynbee, Weber, and Ortega all argued that the interaction of a small number of factors can provide a reasonably valid explanation of historical events. Their placement at different points on the spectrum results less, therefore, from the number of factors they find affecting history than from the degree to which they believe these can provide entirely warranted historical explanations and predictions.

The theories of Taine and Toynbee are predominantly monistic. Taine claimed that history can be explained by the interaction of "race, circumstance, and epoch, which are the internal mainspring, the external pressure, and the acquired momentum" of events (Taine, 1880, 12, 17-18). He said, however, that there is a "fundamental inexactness" in the determination of causes which makes precise predictions impossible (Taine, 1880, 17-18).

Toynbee marshalled much evidence to support his contention that historical change comes about as a result of successful responses to challenges. He described a successful response as being "one that, in addition to merely surmounting the current challenge, surmounts it in a way that evokes a new challenge and keeps life on the move" (Toynbee, 1961, 260). At the same time, Toynbee pointed out that his "laws", including his central concept of challenge-and-response, are only "bets", hypotheses which are tested by evidence. He also believed that these hypotheses do not cover the whole field of human events. Therefore, he said, they are to be regarded, at most, as probabilities for the future (Toynbee, 1961, 237-242). His emphasis upon the limited applicability of explanatory, and especially predictive, concepts means that his position is less monistic than that of Marx, who actually predicted the general course of future events, or of Taine, who said that it is possible to do so.

The theories of Ortega and Weber are predominately pluralistic. Both philosophers, however, took the position that a relatively small number of factors make history comprehensible. For Ortega,

historical events can be comprehended if one focuses upon the interactions between individuals in the generation of dominance (ages forty-five to sixty) and those in the generation of initiation (ages thirty to forty-five) (Ortega, 1958, 60). For Weber, historical events can be comprehended if one focuses upon the interactions between charismatic individuals and bureaucratization. In other words, history is made by individuals who are perceived by their followers as extraordinary in their transactions with officials who attempt to routinize all situations through the exact execution of received orders (Weber, 1958, 48, 53).

The degree of pluralism found in the positions of Ortega and Weber is primarily the result of their emphasis upon individual freedom. Both contended that one has the freedom to decide one's convictions and loyalties and thereby to affect history, and under certain conditions, to change the course it takes. Weber's position may be classified as more pluralistic than Ortega's because Weber placed more emphasis upon the standpoint of the historian. He argued that historical explanation and prediction are forever limited because, he said,

> the number and type of causes which have influenced any given event are infinite and there is nothing in the things themselves to set some of them apart as alone meriting attention (Weber, 1949, 78).

In this view, it is historians who decide what merits attention. Events and facts do not speak for themselves; historians speak. Such a position presents the possibility of an infinite number of valid explanations of events, potentially an extremely pluralistic position.

Among the six theories, only Dilthey's is more pluralistic than Ortega's and Weber's. Weber and Ortega emphasized the role of individual choice and freedom, but contended that valid historical interpretation can be achieved ordinarily by focusing upon the interaction of charisma and bureaucratization or the interaction of the generations, respectively. By contrast, Dilthey emphasized that the historian must concern himself with "the individual person in his own independent existence" as well as with "the whole web of connection" between individuals and their society (Dilthey, 1962, 79). It is difficult to imagine a more pluralistic position.

The theories of these six influential philosopher-historians represent the full range or spectrum of historical theories. They also represent a wide variety of divergent interpretations of history. Toynbee held a Christian interpretation of history while the others' theories are non-Christian. Marx saw man as a producer, an essentially socioeconomic being, while the rest saw him as a symbolic being. Dilthey and Ortega placed the greatest emphasis upon configurations of cultural factors, in the manner of many anthropologists. Marx, Taine, Toynbee, and Weber placed greatest emphasis upon economic, psychological, religious, and political factors, respectively. Despite this wide variety of divergent interpretations, there are basic agreements among the six about the role of individuals and other factors in history. This fact presumably increases the acceptability of their theories as data from which to infer the legitimacy and content of historical study through biographies.

FINDINGS: THE QUESTION OF LEGITIMACY

The testimony of the philosophers in the samples below supports the basic contention that biographical history in some form is sound.[1] The first sample demonstrates that individuals are historical beings, that is, that individuals affect the stream of historical events.[2] The second sample demonstrates that creative or extraordinary individuals are agents of historical change, that is, they may change the course of the historical stream of events.

SAMPLE 1 - INDIVIDUALS AS HISTORICAL BEINGS

Marx

> History does nothing, possesses no enormous wealth, fights no battles. It is rather man, the real living man, who does everything, possesses, fights.... History itself is nothing but the activity of men pursuing their purposes.
>
> The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can be made only in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and their material conditions of life, including those which they find already in existence and those produced by their activity. The first premise of all human history is ....the existence of living human individuals (In Wolfe, 1964, ix; in Gardiner, 1959, 126).

Taine

> Nothing exists except through some individual man; it is this individual with whom we must become acquainted.... Genuine history is brought into existence only when the historian begins to unravel, across the lapse of time, the living man....distinct and complete as he from whom we have just parted in the street (1880, 2).

Toynbee

> Human beings cannot be themselves without interacting with their fellows, and a society is a field of action common to a number of human beings. But the 'source of action' is in the individuals. All growth originates with creative individuals or small minorities of individuals ...(1947, I, 576).

Ortega

> There has been both a collectivist and also an individualist interpretation of historical reality. ...The active, creative nature of personality is, in fact, too evident for the collectivist picture to be acceptable. ...On the other hand, however, the isolated individual is an abstraction. Historical life is social life (1961, 13-14).

Weber

> History strives for the causal analysis and explanation of culturally significant behavior of individuals, institutions, and of certain personalities (1969, 51).

Dilthey

> It would be wrong to confine history to the co-operation of human beings for common purposes. The individual person in his own independent existence is a historical being. ... It is the whole web of connection which stretches from individuals concerned with their own existence to the cultural systems and communities and, finally, to the whole of mankind, which makes up the character of society and history (1962, 79).

The philosophers thus concur (in Sample 1) that individuals affect the stream of historical events. They find them to be neither irretrievably submerged in the masses, nor entirely knowable through some collectivistic abstraction. In other words, there is agreement that (1) history is an affair of individual beings, as opposed to being merely an affair of societies and other collectivities; (2) history is an interactive process between the individual and the social environment; and (3) the individual beings of history and of proper historical study are human beings whose existence cannot be properly understood by reducing them to or subsuming them under an abstraction, such as social organism or world spirit.

SAMPLE 2 - INDIVIDUALS AS AGENTS OF HISTORICAL CHANGE

Marx

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.
>
> The philosophers hitherto have only interpreted the world in various ways; the thing, however, is to change it (Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire, in Feuer, 1959, 320; in Heilbroner, 1953, 126).

Taine

> Man is not an inert being, moulded by a constitution, nor a lifeless being expressed by formula; he is an active and living soul, capable of acting, discovering, creating, devoting himself, and before all, of daring; genuine history is an epic of heroism (1880, 598-599).

Toynbee

> All growth originates with creative individuals or small minorities of individuals....These individuals who set going the process of growth in the societies to which they 'belong' are more than mere men. They can work what to men seem miracles because they themselves are superhuman in a literal and no mere metaphorical sense (1947, 576; 212).

Ortega

> Humanity, in all stages of its evolution, has always been a functioning organism, in which the more energetic members, whatever form their energy may take, have operated upon the remainder and given them a distinct configuration (1961, 14-15).

Weber

> The provisioning of all demands that go beyond those of everyday routine has had....a charismatic foundation. The term 'charisma' will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. ... The individual concerned is treated as a leader (1968, 18; 48).

Dilthey

> In the greatest events of history....we shall always find that two kinds of forces cooperate....Some are tensions which derive from the sense of urgent, unfulfilled needs ....Others rise from the dynamic energy of a positive will, potency, and faith. They rest on the vigorous instincts of many but are illuminated and heightened by the experiences of great personalities (1962, 145).

The six philosophers thus believed that both ordinary and extraordinary individuals are makers of history, though the weight they placed upon each varies significantly (Sample 2). Weber, Taine, and Toynbee made a sharp distinction between the ordinary individual and individuals who have the most to do with historical change--the "charismatic" individuals, heroes, and "supermen", respectively. By contrast, Dilthey, Ortega, and Marx made less distinction between "great persons" and ordinary individuals (Samples 1 and 2). Dilthey referred to historical change's being "illuminated and heightened" by "great personalities" but resting upon "the vigorous instincts of many". Ortega said that in a period of change, the "more energetic members" of society have provided "a distinct configuration". Marx argued that the course of history can be changed sometimes by enlightened individuals, but emphasized that they can do so "not...under circumstances chosen by themselves".

One may infer from the six philosophers' agreements in the samples above that biographical history is a sound, or legitimate, form of historical study. Such an approach, they implied, should utilize interactive, i.e., individual-social concepts and include studies of the lives of both ordinary and extraordinary individuals. These inferences are incorporated into the content findings which follow.

FINDINGS: THE QUESTION OF CONTENT

The findings presented below, in Tables X and Y, are the six philosopher-historians' implied answers to this study's second question, "What is the content of biographical history?" These findings are inferred from their views of history, and incorporate both agreements and disagreements.

TABLE X: THE CONTENT OF BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY - PRINCIPLES

1.0 Study ordinary and extraordinary individuals as representatives of the social/historical system, including their

- 1.1 encounters with each other;
- 1.2 encounters with officials;
- 1.3 search for meaning in these encounters; and
- 1.4 representative and unique responses to these encounters.

2.0 Study the social/historical system

- 2.1 independently of individual lives; and
- 2.2 in its connections with individual lives.

3.0 Study creative individuals or leaders in a personal and/or historical crisis, including their

- 3.1 encounters with followers;
- 3.2 encounters with officials;
- 3.3 search for meaning in these challenging encounters; and
- 3.4 creative responses to these challenging encounters.

4.0 Search for a tragic (dogmatic) element

- 4.1 in institutions' responses to individuals;
- 4.2 from one era or generation to the next;
- 4.3 in all responses to creative, meaning-seeking individuals.

The principles, or focal points, of biographical history are, in sum, individuals making history or changing its course in their roles as (a) representatives of the system (1.0),[3] (b) potential

creators in a crisis (2.0), and (c) agents of change in their quest to achieve or maintain meaning (1.0 - 4.0)[4] Because no individuals can carry out these roles except in their encounters, or interactions, with each other and with officials of their social institutions (the system), biographical history must center upon responses to encounters. Individuals do not, for the most part, decide what their encounters or circumstances are, but they do have the freedom to decide their responses to their circumstances. These responses make, or change history, though not always as they intended because the social system tends to have a life of its own (2.0). Whether history changes or maintains its course depends, at least initially, upon whether individuals' responses to ordinary and challenging encounters are dogmatic (i.e., tragic) or appropriately routine or creative (1.0 - 4.0). Useful and valid ways of approaching these responses to encounters are the principal methods of biographical history presented below in Table Y.

TABLE Y: THE CONTENT OF BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY - METHODS

1.0 Alternately apply the perspectives of economic man/system and symbolical man/system to the study of individuals as

- 1.1 representatives of the system;
- 1.2 creators or dogmatists in crisis; and
- 1.3 agents of change in their search for meaning.

2.0 Alternately apply to the encounters of ordinary and extraordinary individuals the following interactive concepts:

2.1 economic perspective - labor/alienation (Marx)

2.2 symbolical perspective
- 2.21 challenge-and-response (Toynbee),
- 2.22 interactions between generations (Ortega),
- 2.23 charisma/bureaucratization (Weber), and
- 2.24 meaning as the quest for "I" in "Thou" (Dilthey).[5]

3.0 Apply Verstehen,[6] i.e., imaginative, empathetic re-experiencing, to the lives of individuals in ordinary or challenging encounters.

4.0 Empirically test the product of Verstehen, i.e., the imaginative re-construction of individual lives.

5.0 Employ reflexive strategies.[7]

5.1 Inquire into the self-world images of the historical individual and then the self-world images of the investigator.

5.2 Move the inquiry from self to system and return, in a continuing cycle.

6.0 Search for the key to self and system

6.1 Utilize the interactive concepts in 1.0 and 2.0

6.2 Utilize the imaginative reconstructions of the investigator.

The differences between the ideas of Marx, on the one hand, and those of Ortega, Weber, Dilthey, and Toynbee on the other (1.0, 2.0), are essentially debates about the importance of external, institutional factors in history relative to (1) each other; and (2) inner events. The highest priority is placed upon encounters between (a) socioeconomic classes (Marx), (b) officials and charismatic leaders (Weber), (c) the generations (Ortega), (d) those holding conflicting world views (Dilthey), or (e) creative individuals

or minorities and the uncreative majority (Toynbee). None of these philosophers, however, excludes any of these elements from his scheme of historical development. For this reason, and because the six philosophers do not represent all points on the monistic-pluralistic spectrum of theories, their perspectives about man and their interactive concepts must be retained among the methods of biographical history and employed alternately (1.0, 2.0, 6.0).

The methods of biographical history, including the employment of alternative interactive concepts and perspectives discussed above, are implied by a view of historical knowledge held by most of the philosophers in the study. The view is that (a) there is a personal and sociological element in all historical investigation and knowledge, and (b) this element is both a limitation and a necessity.[8] They concur, in other words, that historical knowledge is knowledge from a particular standpoint, or from the position of a particular worldview, and that such a standpoint makes historical knowledge possible. It follows, therefore, that the methods of biographical history should include not only Verstehen and interactive concepts with which to re-construct individual lives. Also they should include empirical inspection, reflexive methods, and alternative perspectives and concepts with which to check and test such re-constructions. These, then, are the principal warrantable methods of biographical history.

IMPLICATIONS

Biographical history has the potential to help social studies teachers resolve the dilemma of wanting to bring history back to life and increase student motivation by using dramatic or heroic biographies, while wondering if this approach would be sound in terms of the nature of historical knowledge. Biographical history can help teachers achieve and maintain the delicate and elusive interconnections between formal subject-matter and students' vital experience. It can, in short, provide significant motivational help without sacrificing valid knowledge. Widespread motivation problems in social studies classrooms indicate that teachers have not achieved or maintained this delicate balance. Research indicates that students have regarded history courses as not currently significant, as unrelated to their personal or practical concerns, and normally as not related to other courses (Gross, 1951, 157-161; Brubaker, 1973, 8-19; Editors of Life, 1969). The employment of alternative interactive concepts within biographical history can retain the connections between the smaller and larger worlds of the student. It can provide a focus upon both the personal and the societal, the more immediate and the more remote, as well as the intimate and the impersonal. Not only that. If teachers use the process of imaginative, empathetic re-experiencing (Verstehen) reflexively, then the smaller and larger worlds of the student, as well as those of the historical actor being studied, are actually a significant part of the subject-matter of the course. Such a combination presumably would generate interst.

Because of the motivation problems prominent in many social studies classes, including those with both conventional and reform orientations, testing of the claim that biographical history increases student motivation should be a high research priority in social studies education. It needs to be tested primarily in terms of whether the students actually find and establish connections between themselves and the historical individuals and system they study. Among the manifestations of these interconnections would presumably be (a) students' perceptions (e.g., viewing history as currently significant and as important to personal concerns), (b) the existence of student identification with historical figures being studied, and (c) students' capacity and tendency to cite implications of macro-world developments for their own micro-worlds.

No doubt biographical history has pitfalls, such as its potential to degenerate into an untenable "great man" theory of history, or perhaps its being too demanding for social studies teachers to undertake without hard-to-come-by help from specialists. Nevertheless, its affirmation that individuals can, and sometimes do, make of their old world a new world, should at least be cause for social educators to consider its potential.

NOTES

[1]The decision to report actual statements here from the six philosophers is based, in part, upon the fact that Marx's theory and positivistic theories, like Taine's, sometimes are interpreted as being completely deterministic or mechanistic. This kind of interpretation does not leave individuals a role in history except perhaps as merely the embodiment of forces beyond their influence or control. The representative statements of Marx and Taine included here appear to make such an interpretation indefensible.

[2]Individuals are not seen as merely historical beings, i.e., as having no nature, nor as merely timeful, finite beings. The agreement is simpler: individuals are part of the stream of events and affect that stream, though they do not automatically change its course.

[3]The social/historical system is a meaningful, interdependent succession of events partly dependent on individuals' intentions and partly independent of these intentions.

[4]Meaning, for purposes here, is defined as a sense of connectedness between oneself and some larger scheme of things one feels a part of and values. It includes a sense of mastery of self and environment.

[5]Taine's concepts are not interactive.

[6]Verstehen literally means, "to understand". It is, however, the type of emotional, imaginative, and intellectual process suggested by the proverb, "To understand is to forgive". As a method of historical investigation, it means imaginative re-living, i.e., an effort to feel and grasp the context of meaning in which a course of action takes place. The six philosophers endorse this process as an essential, initial method in historical study.

[7]Reflexive literally means turning back upon oneself. The six philosophers believed that there is a personal-sociological element in all efforts to know the world and oneself. Therefore, they implied, a student of history seeking full understanding must not only examine evidence but attempt to identify one's own assumptions and self-world images--through which one is necessarily examining the evidence.

[8]Marx is probably an exception. He appears to have emphasized the adequacy of external observation and detached inquiry. He did, however, acknowledge a limiting sociological element (See the preface to Capital, in Feuer, 1959, 44.). Taine's position is similar, though it appears to have been discredited (See Cassirer, 1950, 247-248.).

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